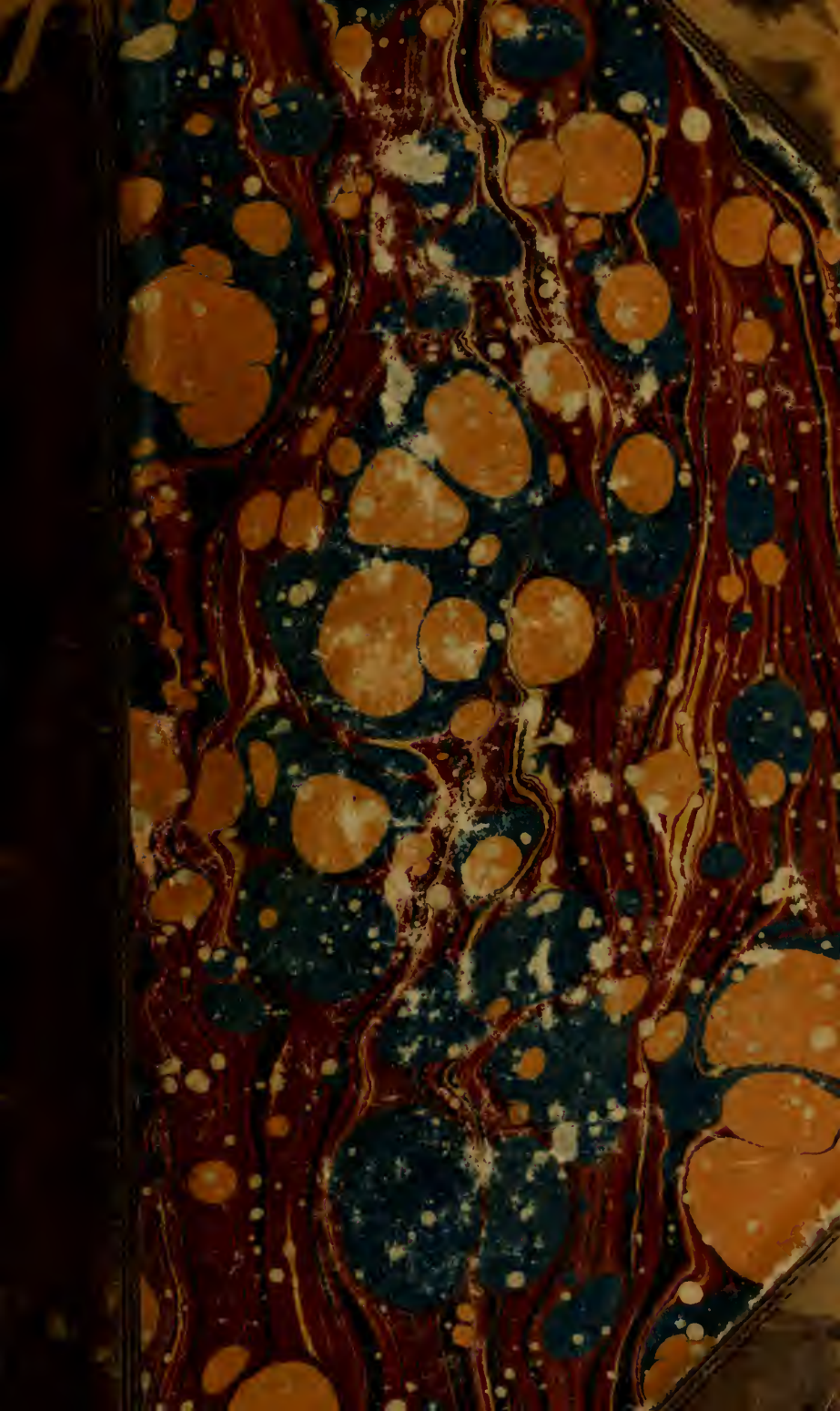

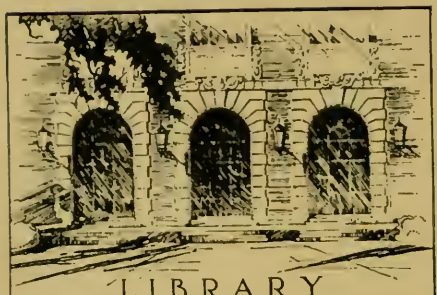

LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

15

NATIONAL SINS

AND

NATIONAL JUDGMENTS.

BY

WILLIAM DODSWORTH, M.A.

"Break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquility."

DAN. iv. 27.

Published by Request.

LONDON:
JAMES BURNS, 17, PORTMAN STREET,
PORTMAN SQUARE.
1847.

A SERMON,

Preached on Wednesday, 24th March, 1847.

Joel II. 1, 2.

"Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain. Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand; a day of darkness and of gloominess; a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains."

Every day of affliction is, in some sense, a day of judgment—a "day of the Lord." It is the lighting down of God's arm upon us; and although it come not, as it will one day come, in punishment upon the wicked, but as we may hope still in mercy and in chastisement, and as a summons to repentance, yet still is it in retribution for our sins—and a kind of merciful anticipation of that last great and dreadful day of the Lord, which shall be "with fury poured out" in "judgment without mercy;" when "the Lord shall be revealed from heaven in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ." As a merciful and corrective anticipation of that day, any signal infliction of God's judgments is called in Scripture "the day of the Lord." So was the taking of Jerusalem by the Chaldæans, which is, perhaps, more immediately referred to in the text. So was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans; and so, in a degree, is any infliction of the judgments of God. God

is calling us to account for our sins, and dealing with us accordingly. These, then, are seasons which inspire great awe. They bring us into near contact with the God of Judgment. They bring Him before us under an aspect most fearful. They point to His uplifted arm. Irreligious men do not and will not see this. They rest in what are called second causes. What they call the law of nature is their God; as if to trace events through any number of lower operations, were any hindrance of the truth that God holds the first moving power of all things in his hands; and that "not even a sparrow falleth to the ground without Him." Of such men Scripture says, "they will not behold the majesty of the Lord; Lord, when Thy hand is lifted up they will not see; but they shall see and be ashamed." Yes; at last every eye shall see Him, and bow down before Him, and confess that He is the Doer of all things. But blessed be God there are those, even now, who hear His voice and see His uplifted arm; of whom it is written, "In the way of Thy judgments, O Lord, have we waited for Thee; the desire of our soul is to Thy name, and to the remembrance of Thee." God grant to us, my brethren, this spirit of humble submission and pious observance of His dealings with us. "Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it."

The prophet Joel is, perhaps, of all the prophets, the most instructive on this particular point. All the prophets, indeed, more or less, are raised up to give warning of God's judgments, and to direct the people how to act in reference to them. But this is specially so with Joel; and as the judgments of God at different times, and the state of the people on whom they are inflicted, bear a close parallel with each other; so it would seem as if this Book of Joel were expressly written for circumstances, such as these in which we now find ourselves.

In the first chapter is described a fearful desolation of the land by a famine. After describing the invasion of the land by the locusts, he proceeds: (Verse 10,) "The field is wasted; the land mourneth, for the corn is wasted; the new wine is dried up; the oil languisheth." Then he describes the husbandmen as ashamed of their unprofitable labours, unable, by their skill or industry, to stay the terrible famine: (Verse 11,) "Be ye ashamed, O ye husbandmen: howl, O ye vine-dressers, for the wheat and for the barley; because the harvest of the field is perished. The vine is dried up, and the fig-tree languisheth, the pomegranate-tree, the palm-tree also, and the apple-tree, even all the trees are withered: because joy is withered away from the sons of men."

Nay, so severe would be the famine, that the due offerings could not be made for the house of God. So he proceeds: (Verse 13,) "Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests: howl, ye ministers of the altar: come, lie all night in sackcloth, ye ministers of my God: for the meat-offering and the drink-offering is withholden from the house of your God."

The prophet then calls for an acknowledgment of all this as a judgment from Almighty God; and summons the nation to a solemn act of humiliation: (Verse 14,) "Sanctify ye a fast; call a solemn assembly; gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord your God, and cry unto the Lord, Alas! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come."

Then, after a further description of the desolation of the land, the second chapter opens with a second warning of impending judgments—of judgments yet more terrible and desolating than before; but followed, withal, with a promise, that upon the true repentance and humiliation of the people, God would

UIUC

relent, and turn from the fierceness of His anger. This at first is set forth as a possibility of mercy—as affording only some little gleam of hope: "*who knoweth* if He will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind Him, even a meat-offering and a drink-offering unto the Lord your God." But soon this fainter hope seems to wax greater and greater, and at length rises to positive assurance; if only the humiliation were real and sincere. "Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, and give not thine heritage to reproach. . . . . Then will the Lord be jealous for His land, and pity His people; yea, the Lord will answer, and say unto His people, Behold, I will send you corn, and wine, and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith. . . . . Fear not, O land, be glad and rejoice, for the Lord will do great things. Be not afraid, ye beasts of the field; for the pastures of the wilderness do spring, for the tree beareth her fruit, the fig-tree and the vine do yield their strength. The floors shall be full of wheat, and the fats shall overflow with wine and oil. . . . . And ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who hath dealt wondrously with you."

From this brief outline we may see the general purport of this most striking prophecy. In the first chapter is a prediction of God's impending judgments for the sins of the people: and then, if they repent not, a still severer judgment is threatened in the second chapter. The first woe would be but as a foretaste of the second: and the text, which is the opening of the second chapter, is the announcement of this. It gives great force and emphasis to its language, to consider it as uttered in a kind of pause between the first and second outpouring of God's judgments. The first, in the anticipative eye

of the prophet, had passed with but little effect; the second is announced in these stirring words: "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain: let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the Lord cometh, for it is nigh at hand; A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains." And yet if the people would but repent, this severer judgment should be but the harbinger of a day of mercy. Almighty God would "stay his rough wind in the day of the east wind," and bring back days of joy and peace.

Now surely the application of all this to our own circumstances is very strikingly obvious; for,

I. This day is to us "a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and of thick darkness;"

II. And yet a day of hope—if we are really bending under God's judgments;

III. And yet of trembling hope—lest one judgment being unimproved, another should fall more heavily upon us.

We will consider these several points.

I. It is a day of darkness and gloominess. For surely the hand of the Lord is upon us, and the lighting down of His terrible arm. He has visited us with the rod. I say, he has visited *us;* for let no spirit of selfishness separate our own interests from those of our brethren. It is true that, in this part of our country, we are as yet spared the horrors of famine and pestilence. But must we not feel that God's hand has touched us as a people? It must fall first somewhere: and it has fallen not on us personally, but upon our brethren. What then? shall we say, This is no concern of ours; it does not touch us; they are visited for their sins; but this proves nothing against us? Are we Christians, and is this the law of Christ? Far

otherwise are we taught: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ;" "Remember them that are in bonds as bound with them, and them that suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body." If we are so selfish as thus to sever ourselves from our brethren, this last thought may still affect us: "We ourselves also are in the body." Judgment has not "first begun at us;" but who can say where it will end? I believe that those best able to form a judgment on such matters, so far as human foresight can judge, see much reason to fear for ourselves; at least they speak doubtfully. If God shall mercifully send us fruitful seasons, all may be well. If our next harvest be abundant, we may be spared. But if not, the very sufferings which now harrow up our souls, in the hearing of the ear, may be realised before our eyes, and in our own families. And, after all, how very short is the longest human foresight! Judgments may come in a way we see not, and know not, and think not of. There is "the pestilence that walketh in darkness, and the destruction that wasteth at noon-day;" or one of many other calamities may be God's way of visiting us.

But the darkness and gloominess of this day is not only or chiefly on account of the judgments we may fear,—but much more on account of the sins which have provoked them. The uplifted arm of God tells us, with a voice which will be heard, that we have sinned in departing from Him. Our sins have separated between us and our God; and we have before us the sorrowful task of inquiring, "Wherefore He contendeth with us," and what is "the Lord's controversy with the inhabitants of the land?"

And, here, where are we to begin?—where are we to enter upon this heavy task?

1. First, and foremost, stands out *the fearful state*

of irreligion into which large masses of our people have fallen. I know that this is accounted a hackneyed subject, and people are tired of hearing of it: and yet it must be again and again sounded in their ears; for surely it is a most crying sin. Here we are, a Christian people—believing in heaven and hell, and a judgment to come;—believing that the Son of God came down from heaven to save men;—believing that He suffered and died to save men;—believing that the everlasting destinies of men, for good or for evil, for heaven or for hell, are fixed, eternally fixed at the close of this short transient life;—and yet there are thousands, and hundreds of thousands, of these immortal men living around us untaught, unwarned, and almost unthought of, "no man caring for their souls!" Men, too, they are, with the responsibilities of Christians upon them—baptized into Christ—invested with higher than angels' blessings, and then left to live and die like the beasts that perish! But it is often asked, Whose fault is this?—and every one is ready to find it in his brother rather than in himself. Some will say, it is in a slothful clergy, and others will say, it is in a niggard laity. Some will attribute it to the want of zeal in instructors; and others to perverseness in the instructed. But who thinks of laying the sin at his own door? And yet, no doubt, it does lie there. The sin is in ourselves—in each of us more or less. It is shared by us all, from the highest to the lowest. Have we, any one of us, done what we could to remove or lessen this crying evil? Have we given our substance, and have we given our influence? Such an inquiry tells more forcibly in this free country, where every one has his measure of influence. Are, then, the interests of Christ's Church cared for, as are the fleeting interests of this present world? Or are not the concerns of His Church conducted on

grounds which would not be tolerated where the concerns of this life only are at stake? To give point to such an inquiry one must descend into particulars. Would it be endured, for example, if the chief places in our army, or navy, or courts of law, were filled on principles which notoriously and avowedly influence such appointments in the Church? Would it be tolerated if the General of an army were selected from motives which oftentimes avowedly influence the choice of Bishops?—or would the command of a ship, in a time of critical warfare, be assigned on considerations which often make a rector of a parish? Where our temporal interests only are at stake, do we suffer court favour, influential connexion, and mere relationship in blood, to guide men's choice?—And yet is not this avowedly notoriously done in the cure of souls? Who cares for these things,—who remonstrates,—who speaks of them otherwise than with a smile,—as amusing instances of the contempt with which the Church may be treated? Do men exclaim against it, and petition against it, or is public opinion, in other things so prolific of reform, outraged by it? No; because it is only men's souls that are lost by it! But is not this offensive, insulting, in the sight of Almighty God? Does He look with indifference on such things? Listen to His word by the prophet:—"Ye offer polluted bread upon my altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted Thee? In that ye say, The table of the Lord is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? Offer it now unto thy governor. Will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the Lord of hosts."[1] Hear, again, His word, by Ezekiel:—"Woe to the shepherds that do feed themselves! Should not the shepherds

[1] Mal. i. 7, 8.

feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and clothe ye with the wool; ye kill them that are fed, but ye feed not the flock. The diseased have ye not strengthened; neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost . . . . . And they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became meat to all the beasts of the field when they were scattered."[1]

There are some, it may be, who feel a secret complacency when they hear such reproofs as these, 'Ah!' they are ready to say, 'it is but too true; the clergy are too slothful, and too secular; if they did their duty things would not be so bad as they are.' As to the substance of such charges, let them be sorrowfully admitted. Let us plead guilty; and let us humble ourselves before God for our remissnesses, and for our sins. Only let me warn others, that they must share the guilt. Where the ministers of religion are slothful or corrupt, it cannot be that the people are without blame. Either they have neglected prayer for the priesthood, (and "whosoever is without sin" in this respect, "let him cast the first stone,") or by their positive irreligion, or from not using what influence they have for the promotion of religion and piety, they have hindered the good that might have been done. I am quite sure that if we look upon the irreligion of this land, as we ought to look upon it,—upon the masses of Christian people who are living in heathen ignorance, and worse than heathen sin,—and think, each of us, of what we have done, or rather, left undone, towards removing this great misery of our land, we shall see that the fault does not lie exclusively at the door of

[1] Ezek. xxxiv. 2, &c.

this or that class of persons, but it is the sin and transgression of us all. "We have sinned, and committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from Thy precepts, and from Thy judgments. Neither have we hearkened to Thy servants, the prophets, who spake in Thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land."[1]

And here must be noticed, what is certainly a special feature in our sins this day. I do not say exclusively of this day, but certainly more than ordinarily apparent amongst us;—I mean, our making religion itself a matter of dissension;—our spending our zeal and our strength in disputes with each other, instead of in the great work of advancing God's kingdom, first in our own hearts, and then in the hearts of others. While we are disputing who is right and who is wrong; about this person or that; what is such an one's tendencies, and what he will do; souls are perishing around us, and our own are in imminent danger. Look at the fact as it is. Our religion, instead of binding us together, is the most fruitful source of our dissensions. We Englishmen, instead of being bound together by the blessed Gospel of Christ, are hereby severed from each other. We make Christ, not the Author of peace, but of confusion. Or if this be not so, we can only have peace with each other when apart from Him. We can only meet on common ground, by banishing from our communications and counsels that Holy Name in which every Christian work ought to be done, and every Christian word to be spoken. What a fearful thing to be confessed, if we really think of it, that we can unite in almost every object, but in that of glorifying Him "who bought us with His blood." Nay, not only is this so in the Senate, in politics, in

[1] Daniel ix. 5.

literature, in science; but, at length, it has come to be a question whether we can educate our children, without first finding a place for them where the name of Christ must not be named; or where, at least, He must not be named as the true and living God, who came in our nature, and died to save us.

And then, what fearful crimes do our divisions bring in their train. We leave myriads around us to die in ignorance, because we cannot agree in what we should teach them; and leave the heathen world to lie in wickedness, while we spend our strength in useless disputation. Nay, we have in some cases even consigned our countrymen, whom we have banished from our shores for their crimes, almost to hopeless guilt and misery, because we cannot agree how Christ should be ministered to them. Who can measure the untold guilt of such a state of things? "Shall I not visit for these things, saith the Lord, and shall not My soul be avenged on such a nation as this."[1]

2. And now, if we turn our thoughts to the sins of *our social life*, we shall find still further grounds of humiliation. God has constituted our social relationships in Himself. The relationship of parent and child, husband and wife, master and servant, derive their sanctity from the relationship in which God and Christ vouchsafe to stand to us. And surely it is not too much to say, that we see in our time a great disruption of these ties. I do not stop to inquire whether there may be more or fewer positive breaches of social duty at this time than at other times. But I notice as our sin, the relaxation of the ties themselves. Thus one must say of the relationship of parent and child, which is the foundation of all other relationships, the bond is obviously loosened. In the upper classes, by want of discipline on one side; by want of reverence

[1] Jeremiah v. 9.

on the other; by foolish and premature independence. While in large classes of the poor, especially the manufacturing poor, this endearing parental tie is often almost dissolved after the first years of infancy, and the temporal and eternal interests of the child sacrificed for the sake of Mammon.

Again: who must not see what a grievous sin lies upon the land, in a neglect of the higher duties of master and servant. That fine and noble feeling of attachment which, in better times, bound them together, by which the servant was considered as a permanent member of the family, one to be cared for spiritually as well as temporally, and second only to the children themselves; and by which, on the other hand, the servant identified his master's interests with his own, and looked up to him and revered him as his natural protector and guide; this is almost gone: and for it is substituted indifference on one side, and boasted independence on the other. These engagements are now formed from mere mercenary motives, to be dissolved at any time, by the caprice of either party; and as one result of this, I suppose, *as a class*, of course admitting of many happy exceptions, there is none that lives more entirely "without God in the world," than the class of household servants. Even Christian masters seem to use them oftentimes as if they forgot that they had souls to be lost or saved. I may just mention as an instance of this, and as coming within my own knowledge, that there are heads of families who would by no means themselves omit their attendance at church, and even at sacraments, who yet care not to make arrangements by which it is scarcely possible that their servants can enjoy the like blessing. In many instances some household servants are almost precluded from going to church, and in many more from any due attendance at sacraments.

I might go on to speak of other relationships; for example, of master and apprentice. This was once almost a sacred relationship; now every such feeling about it is all but gone. And again, how far have we gone in breaking up the bonds of pastoral relationship? But let what has been said suffice to turn our thoughts to this ground of humiliation. Surely these are sins which lie heavily upon us.

There is, however, one other sin, or rather class of sins, of a more general kind, which must be noticed. I mean the inordinate pursuit of money, together with the growth of luxury; and with this, as always has been, the growing separation of the richer from the poorest classes, and the consequent neglect of them. Have we forgotten the guilt which must lie on this land for that mania in money speculations, which occurred a little more than a year ago? What gambling, what fraud, what deceit and overreaching; in a word, what undisguised worship of Mammon carried away the nation,—it is scarcely too much to say, the nation! Not only the claims of religion, but the principles of common honour and honesty, were sacrificed to the base love of gain. Men, from the highest to the lowest, seemed to lose all shame in this mad pursuit. And then the extravagant luxuries of the rich tend to and effect their severance from the poor. It always is so. An extreme in one direction tends to bring about an extreme in another. Some people think that much is done for the poor through our varied societies. I would not depreciate the benefits which flow through those channels. Let us thank God for them in the absence of what is better. But it is often forgotten that the tendency even of these institutions is to prevent communication between the rich and poor *on any extensive scale*. It is true that these societies enlist

some few amongst the rich to look after the interests of their poorer brethren. But how many, it may be, satisfy themselves with a money gift to a society, and on that account excuse themselves from that "pure and undefiled religion, before God and the Father, which is to *visit* the widows and fatherless in their affliction." I say, then, that the tendency of *societies*, of which *money* is the bond of union, is to substitute money for men, to content persons with giving what they have, instead of giving themselves; oftentimes to destroy sympathy with the poor, to encourage hard and repulsive methods of relief; to do away with the thought of the blessing and privilege of giving; and to induce a forgetfulness that, in ministering unto the poor, we are ministering unto Christ Himself.

II. So much time has been occupied in this sad, but yet very brief and inadequate, outline, of the grounds of our humiliation, that but little remains for the other points of observation which the text suggests to us. And yet I must not omit to notice that in "this day of darkness and gloominess," there is for us a gleam of hope. Our assembling together this day to humble ourselves before God, at the summons of our Sovereign, is a hopeful feature for us. The language which our Sovereign has been advised to use, is as comforting to the Christian heart, as, alas! it is unusual. How gratifying to hear such words as these:—"That trusting in the mercy of Almighty God, that notwithstanding the sore punishment He hath laid upon us and our people, He will, if we turn to Him in due contrition and penitence of heart, withdraw His afflicting hand;"—then follows the order for the Fast; and then the Proclamation continues:—"that so both we and our people may humble ourselves before

Almighty God, in order to obtain pardon of our sins, and may in the most devout and solemn manner send up our prayers and supplications to the Divine Majesty, for the removal of those heavy judgments which our manifold sins and provocations have most justly deserved."

This is surely language becoming a Christian queen and a Christian government. We cannot suppose that such solemn words are used as a mere form, merely for the sake of precedent. Surely no one would venture so to trifle with holy things! We must take them as real words; and if they be only followed by real acts, we may find a Scripture example to encourage our best hopes: "The people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For the word came to the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He said that He would do unto them; and He did it not."[1]

III. But if this day of darkness be a day of hope, it is yet of trembling hope. The Ninevites,

[1] Jonah iii. 5—10.

we see, found mercy, not by their fast alone, but by their fast accompanied with real repentance and amendment. And, as we have seen, the whole argument of this prophecy of Joel turns upon this, that if we do not sincerely repent under one judgment, God will send another more severe. THIS FAST-DAY CANNOT LEAVE THIS NATION AS IT FINDS IT. It comes as "a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death." If it bring forth "works meet for repentance," well; if we really do amend our ways and our doings, what mercies may not be in store for us from His hand, "who chasteneth whom He loveth, and scourgeth whom He receiveth!" But if not, what is this but the beginning of troubles? and who can say what will be the end?

Repent, therefore, O my brethren, and turn ye every one from his evil way, that iniquity be not your ruin. If it can be said that the charge of national sin is vague and indefinite, too much divided to make a deep impression; this cannot be said of national repentance, for this must begin with personal repentance. If, as individuals, we become what Christians ought to be, our Christian land will become what it ought to be: a general personal reformation would most certainly be followed by a national reformation. National judgments and visitations call each of us, in our several spheres of duty, to amendment. Let us each search and try his ways; let not this day pass away from any one of us, without resolving upon some distinct specific amendment,—something that we can distinctly name to ourselves. We often lose by the desultoriness of our resolutions; we resolve in general to do better, and perhaps sincerely, but without having the point of amendment distinctly before our minds. Now, I am sure we should bring down a blessing upon ourselves—upon ourselves personally and collectively—upon this con-

gregation—and upon this parish, if we would each of us this day set ourselves to amend some one fault,—to do some one good work which we have neglected,—in prayer, in fasting, in almsgiving; in our personal conduct or habits of life; in our conduct towards others—as parents, as children, as masters, as servants; in our communications with others; in allaying the bitterness of strife; in checking the accusations of brethren; in softening harsh judgments; in witnessing for Christ; in meekly bearing His cross;—we can alleviate some misery, comfort some sorrow, minister to some want.

Behold, then, the uplifted arm of God: "Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it. The Lord's voice crieth unto the city, and the man of wisdom shall see thy name."[1] We have sinned; we have deserved punishment; God threatens to inflict it. Hearken then to his voice: "Break off thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by showing mercy to the poor, if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity."[2]

[1] Micah vi. 9. [2] Dan. iv. 27.

FINIS.

R. CLAY, PRINTER, BREAD STREET HILL.